Literature review

Drugs and (dis)order in Afghanistan

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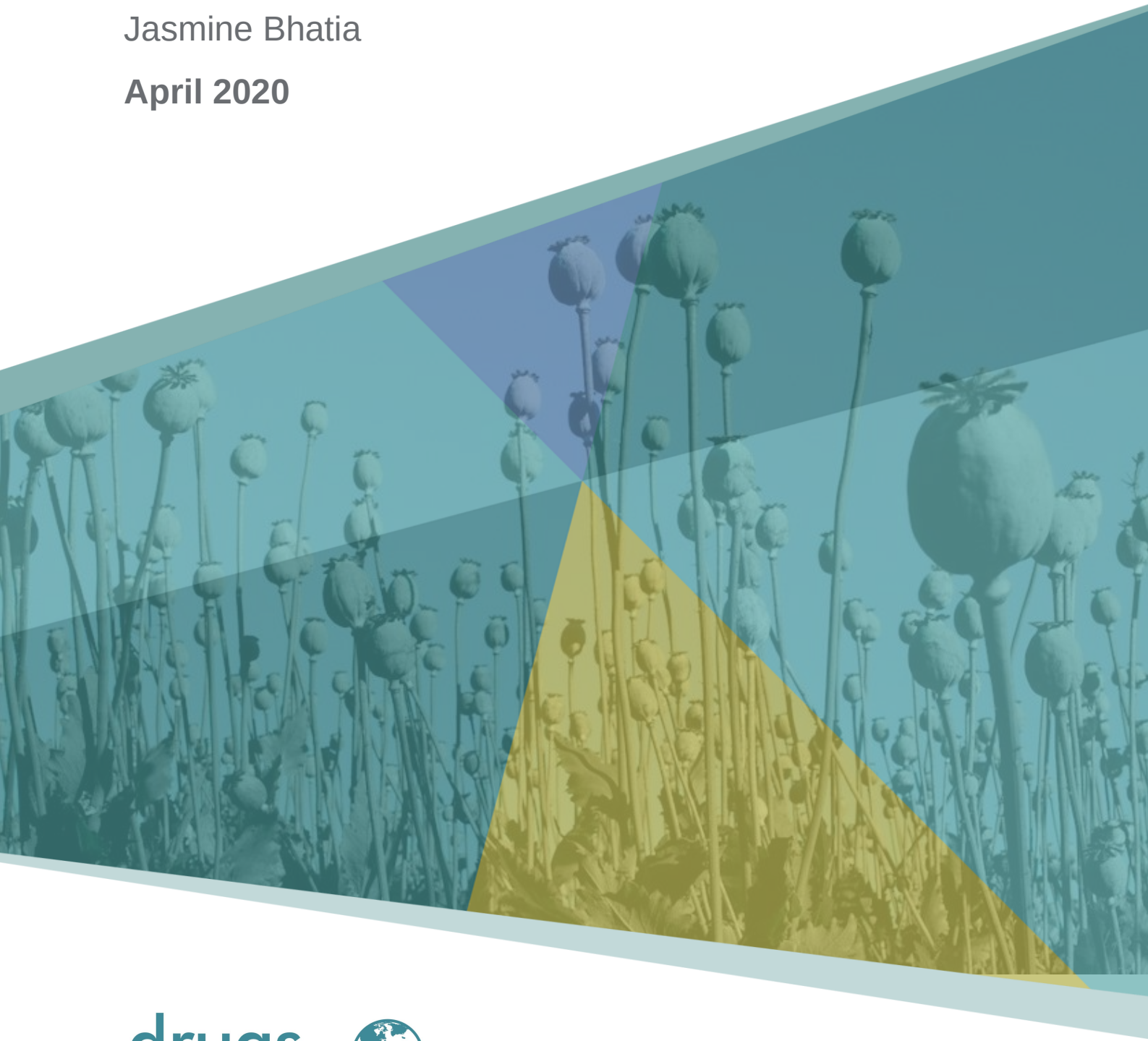

drugs & (dis)order

About Drugs & (dis)order

‘Drugs & (dis)order: building sustainable peacetime economies in the aftermath of war’ is a four-year research project generating new evidence on how to transform illicit drug economies into peace economies in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar. It is an international consortium of internationally recognised organisations with unrivalled expertise in drugs, conflict, health and development. Led by SOAS, University of London, project partners are: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), Alcis, Christian Aid, Kachinland Research Centre (KRC), London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), Organization for Sustainable Development and Research (OSDR), Oxford’s School of Global and Area Studies (OSGA), PositiveNegatives, Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN), Universidad de los Andes, and Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

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Abstract

For nearly two decades, Afghanistan has been at the forefront of the War on Terror and the War on Drugs. What has been learned about the intersection of conflict and the illicit drug economy over this period, and how does the history of the drug economy in Afghanistan shape these dynamics? This review essay summarises key insights and debates from academic literature on the illicit drug economy in Afghanistan, from its origins to the present day. I conclude by discussing possible implications distilled from the Afghan experience for policymakers and identify gaps to inform further research.

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1. Introduction

The illicit drug economy has been frequently linked to political disorder and violence in Afghanistan over the past several decades. At some point between 1992 and 1994 – at the height of its civil war – Afghanistan became the largest producer of illicit opium in the world, and has consistently remained so apart from a widespread but short-lived ban enforced by the Taliban Government in 2000 and 2001. Afghanistan's share of global opium production has steadily increased since the post-Taliban Government was established in 2001. In 2017, an estimated 86% of the world's supply of illicit opium was produced in the country (UNODC, 2018b). Afghanistan is also estimated to be one of the world's largest producers of cannabis and hashish (Verma, 2018).

This essay provides an overview of the academic and grey literature on the purported relationship between illicit drugs and violence in Afghanistan. I focus on two main questions defined by the Global Challenges Research Fund project Drugs & (dis)order. First, what historical conditions gave rise to the emergence of the drug economies in Afghanistan? Second, in what ways do these illicit drug economies shape the dynamics of state fragility and armed conflict?

The article is structured as follows. The next section provides an overview of historical accounts of how illicit drug economies emerged in Afghanistan, including the evolution of opium cultivation, cannabis and hashish, and synthetics. However, as opium is the most dominant illicit drug in Afghanistan, it is worth noting that the works reviewed in this review focus mainly on opium poppy cultivation and trafficking. The next section outlines competing narratives about the expansion of the drug economy and the relationship between drugs and political violence over successive historical periods. I provide an overview of contemporary qualitative and quantitative approaches, reflecting on key debates and limitations to existing empirical literature. I conclude by discussing potential future avenues for research.

Before proceeding, it is worth highlighting the limitations of this review. The paper does not address wider debates about terminology, such as whether it is appropriate to categorise economies as 'licit' and 'illicit', 'legal' and 'illegal' in Afghanistan and many other contexts. It is recognised that these distinctions are problematic and politically loaded, but an extended discussion on terminology is beyond the scope of this paper. There is also a large literature on drug interventions, particularly at the international level, that is far too broad to be covered here. However, I acknowledge that this literature provides important context in explaining the history of drug interventions in Afghanistan, and will be an area of exploration for future work.

2. The historical roots of illicit drug economies in Afghanistan

Opium

The earliest known instances of opium poppy cultivation date back to the Mesopotamian region, as early as 3400 BCE (Santella and Triggle, 2007). From there, cultivation is believed to have spread south and west into Egypt and Europe, and eventually eastward into Asia. Arab traders introduced opium across various settlements along the Silk Road, and by the 8th century AD cultivation was evident in India and China (Brownstein, 1993).

The earliest records of opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan begin in the 18th century, though it is likely that cultivation was practiced much earlier, given the presence of the crop in surrounding countries (Farrell and Thorne, 2005). Opium was traditionally used in Afghan communities for medicinal purposes, particularly for pain relief and to treat respiratory conditions (Todd et al., 2005). Todd et al. date the presence of opium in Afghanistan to as early as 1100 AD, though there is little concrete evidence. In the early 20th century, as a non-signatory to the 1912 Hague Opium Convention, Afghanistan legally exported raw opium to the global market, constituting an important source of state revenue (Bradford, 2013). This continued until 1945 when, under international pressure and hoping to attract more US foreign aid, Afghanistan outlawed cultivation of the drug (Farrell and Thorne, 2005; Bradford, 2013).

However, the ban was poorly enforced, and while there are some indications of an initial drop in annual output, the illicit drug economy continued to expand (DuPee, 2010). The 1955 prohibition on opium in neighbouring Iran and growing global demand for narcotics throughout the 1960s created further opportunities for production and smuggling in Afghanistan (Bradford, 2013; DuPee, 2010). Political and economic crises during the 1970s, as well as the disruption of other regional supply routes, contributed to the continued rise of opium production in Afghanistan (Farrell and Thorne, 2005; Bradford, 2013; DuPee, 2010). The first clandestine heroin laboratory may have been established around 1971 in Nangarhar, though heroin production remained relatively uncommon until the mid-1980s (DuPee, 2010).

The Soviet invasion and outbreak of war in late 1979 boosted opium cultivation substantially and marked a turning point in terms of Afghanistan's predominance in the global marketplace. As economic conditions deteriorated for Afghan farmers and markets for licit crops were disrupted, many turned to opium cultivation for greater financial security (Schetter, 2004). During the 1980s, in flows of military aid to both sides of the conflict provided local commanders with resources to invest in the production, processing and trafficking of opium (Goodhand, 2008). Over the 1980s opium production in Afghanistan increased 15% annually on average (Farrell and Thorne, 2005).

Figure 1. Opium cultivation in Afghanistan in hectares (1994-2018)

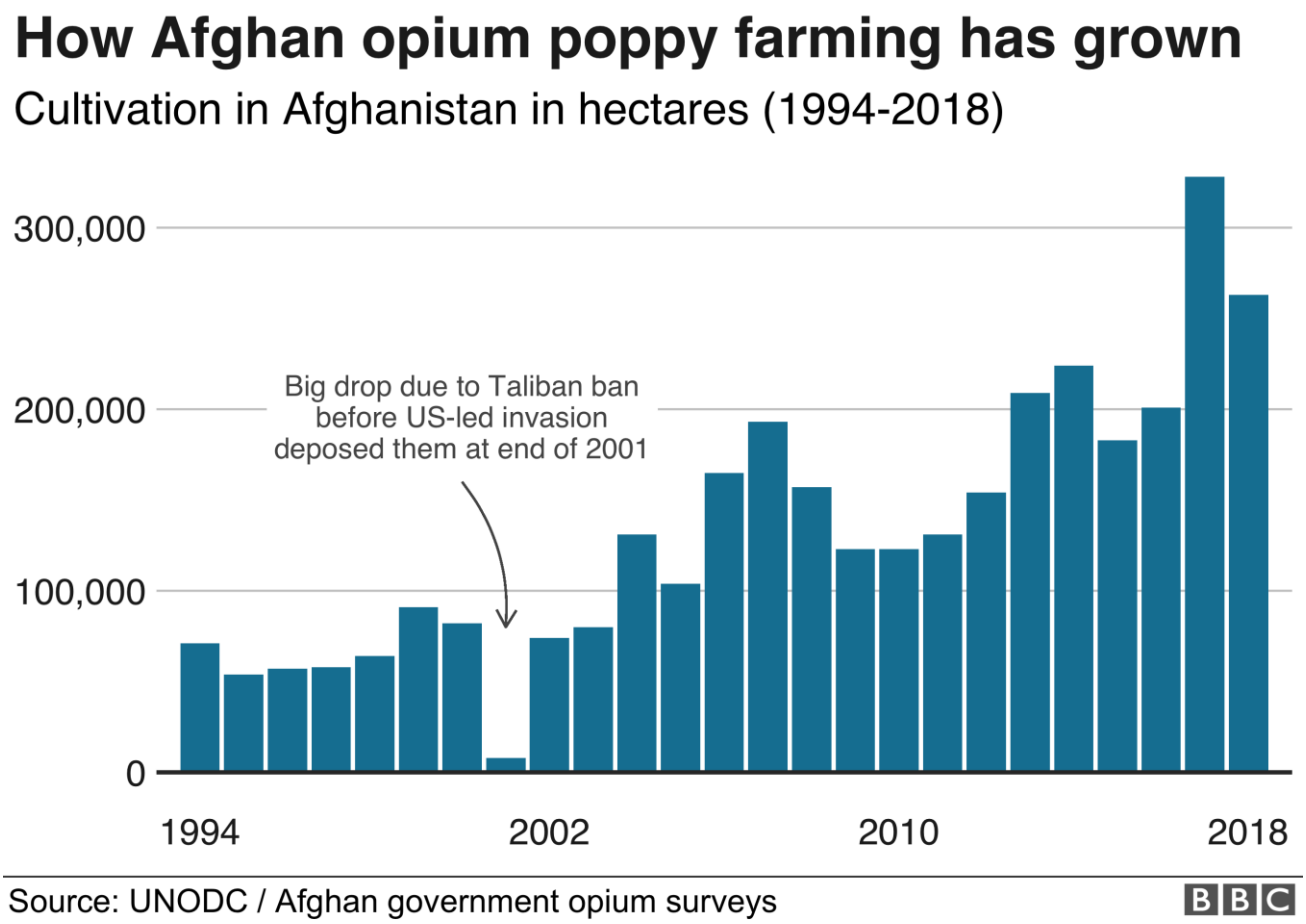

Figure: reproduced from BBC, 2019

After the withdrawal of the Soviet Union and the subsequent collapse of the Communist rgime in the early1990s, the country entered a period of civil war fought between several Mujahadeen factions. As support from international patrons deteriorated, military commanders often increased their participation in the illicit drugs and cross-border smuggling trade (Goodhand, 2008). During this period, cultivation expanded significantly, and Afghanistan became the largest producer of illicit opium in the world (Figure 1). Cultivation also spread from traditional regions of production in the south, east, and north-east to elsewhere in the country, spurred mainly by internal migration of opium farmers (Mansfield, 2016).

Concerned about the explosion of illicit opium production during the Afghan civil war, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) began conducting annual opium production surveys in Afghanistan from 1994 onwards (UNODC, 2003). According to their estimates, the early years of Taliban rule (1996-1999) production continued to rise, peaking at over 4600 metric tons, an over 15-fold increase from 1980 (UNODC, 2003). Initially, the Taliban did little to intervene, apart from a few cosmetic enforcement measures (Mansfield,

2016). As pressure mounted from international organisations, the Taliban implemented a comprehensive ban on opium production in 2000 (Farrell and Thorne, 2005). Farrell and Thorne outline how the Taliban enforced the ban in their territories, using local *shuras* to disseminate information and punish non-compliance. As a result, opium production plunged significantly, from approximately 3,726 metric tons in 2000 to 185 metric tons in 2001 (UNODC, 2003). While a few areas of the country, notably Badakhshan, did not comply with the ban, the overall drop in cultivation was hailed as a remarkable achievement (Mansfield, 2016).

These reductions were short-lived. As Mansfield (2016) notes, the opium ban was unpopular in many areas, weakening the legitimacy of the Taliban regime and speeding its eventual collapse after the US led intervention in late 2001. Furthermore, the ban led to a sharp rise in the farm-gate price of opium, making cultivation significantly more profitable in the early years of the post-Taliban government (UNODC, 2003; Farrell and Thorne, 2005; Mansfield, 2016). Between 2002 and 2004, this profitability likely drove the expansion of opium poppy cultivation, including into areas with limited experience of cultivation (Mansfield, 2016). Opium cultivation was also often the sole option for farmers living in areas beset by water scarcity or drought (Pain, 2008). Gross incomes from opium, morphine and heroin trafficking also rose during this period (UNODC, 2003). Since then, levels of opium cultivation have fluctuated, declining between 2008 and 2011, and rising significantly after 2011, hitting an all-time high in 2017, before declining slightly in 2018 (UNODC, 2018b). Afghanistan is currently the dominant producer of illicit opium in the world, producing between 80% and 90% of the world's supply (Goodman and Sutton, 2015). However, it should be noted that these aggregate trends masked considerable variation in cultivation at the subnational level over this period, as some local authorities were more effective than others at implementing the bans (Mansfield, 2016).

Table 1. Critical periods of illicit opium production in Afghanistan

Period	Description
Until 1945	Cultivation for traditional/customary use; export of raw opium to global markets.
1945-1958	Nominal ban on opium cultivation passed, but poorly enforced; opium cultivation continues to grow.
1955-1979	Opium ban in neighbouring countries and growing global demand for illicit drugs creates more incentives for cultivation in Afghanistan; short-lived 1958 opium ban in Badakhshan enforced and then withdrawn.
1979-1992	Cultivation rises exponentially during Soviet occupation; military commanders establish links to illicit drug economy.
1992-1996	Political order disintegrates and all factions in Afghan civil war engage in drug economy. Afghanistan becomes world's largest producer of illicit opium.
1996-2000	Taliban regime gradually establishes control; cultivation continues to flourish.
2000-2001	Widely enforced Taliban ban on cultivation leads to drastic drop in cultivation during 2000-2001 growing season.
2002-2008	Overthrow of Taliban regime and rising global opium prices lead to resurgence of cultivation; expansion of cultivation to northern and central regions as well as significant growth in south; many officials in new regime linked to drug economy.
2008-2011	Counter-narcotics initiatives and declining global prices lead to overall declines in opium production, though bans were inconsistently enforced.
2011-Present	Cultivation rebounds, leading to record highs in 2017; Afghanistan dominates global production of illicit opium.

It is important to emphasise limitations to the figures above. While general trends on opium cultivation in Afghanistan are generally agreed, precise figures about the size of the annual opium crop and the drug economy as a whole are difficult to estimate (UNODC, 2018b). Estimates of cultivation areas and yields are often politicised – either overestimated or downplayed, depending on the incentives of the organisations in charge of the estimating, and inaccessible areas are often excluded from annual surveys (Mansfield, 2016). Provinces designated as 'poppy-free' often still maintain limited amounts of cultivation, and can still serve as important tracking hubs, thus remaining highly integral to the drug economy. Mansfield has criticised the preoccupation of international institutions such as UNODC with chasing sharp reductions in these metrics, without taking account of the extent to which metrics are genuinely reflective of realities on the ground, and cautioned against using these datasets to inform policymaking (Mansfield, 2016, 2018b).

Cannabis and hashish

The cannabis plant is thought to be indigenous to Central Asia and has a long history of widespread cultivation in the region. The plant has a variety of uses: fibres can be derived from the stalks, the seeds are edible, and cannabis flowers, leaves, and resin can be used for medicinal purposes and as an intoxicant (Bjelica and Foschini, 2019). Hashish, called *chars* in Dari and Pashto, is a product of cannabis resin. Afghanistan produces a particularly potent variety of hashish, known as 'Afghan Black'.

Cannabis has a more ambiguous status than other intoxicants such as alcohol, and no widespread consensus exists amongst Islamic scholars as to whether consumption should be prohibited (Bjelica and Foschini, 2019). In Afghanistan, social mores related to hashish consumption are complicated. On the one hand, hashish users are often thought to be honest, generous, and kind, and consumption has been referenced humorously in jokes and folk songs (Verma, 2018; Ali et al., 2019). However, hashish consumption is also negatively associated with laziness, a loss of virility, and capriciousness; the term *charsi* (hashish smoker) is sometimes used pejoratively (Ali et al., 2019).

While there is a dearth of hard evidence, cannabis and hashish consumption for psychotropic purposes seems to have been historically widespread in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the region. In the early 20th century Afghanistan was also a major trade route for central Asian hashish to consumers on the subcontinent (Bjelica and Foschini, 2019). In 1934, a Chinese government ban on hashish led Afghans to start producing hashish in export quantities (Bjelica and Foschini, 2019). During the 1960s and 1970s, an influx of western tourists traveling along the 'hippy trail' further increased demand that spurred local production. At the same time, growing demand in Europe increasingly shifted cannabis production in Afghanistan from a cottage industry serving local, traditional markets to large-scale commercially driven exports (Carpentier et al., 2012). Concerned about the growing spread of hashish, the Afghan Government outlawed cannabis production in 1973. However, this edict was rarely enforced; in the same year, the King's personal valet was implicated in hashish smuggling (Bjelica and Foschini, 2019). Estimates of the precise volume of cultivation during this period are sparse, ranging from 150 to 400 metric tons between 1975 and 1979 (Bjelica and Foschini, 2019).

While there is little evidence about levels of production and consumption during the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, there are some indications that Afghan refugees who fled to Pakistan continued cultivation along the border.

Hashish consumption flourished on both sides of the war, consumed by Russian soldiers and civilians based in Kabul, as well as by anti-Soviet Mujahadeen fighters (Bjelica and Foschini, 2019; Ali et al., 2019). Ali et al. (2019) observe that during the ensuing civil war hashish became associated with general lawlessness and disorder, as it was consumed by some infamous commanders and militia leaders. When the Taliban took power, they generally discouraged cannabis and hashish, introducing draconian sanctions for both producers and consumers (Bjelica and Foschini, 2019). However, it is not known how effective these measures were, as there is little to no data available.

Since 2001, the Afghan Government has passed successive counter-narcotics legislation criminalising cannabis and hashish cultivation. Nonetheless, cultivation remains widespread, with an estimated potential of 1,300 metric tons of hashish produced in 2012 (Bjelica and Foschini, 2019). Upwards of 1 million Afghans consume the drug on a regular basis, particularly concentrated in large cities such as Herat or Kabul (Ali et al., 2019). Hashish use is common amongst members of the Afghan National Army and Police, particularly as a means to cope with manning remote or isolated outposts (Ali et al., 2019). Hashish has also grown in popularity amongst more educated middle classes, who use the drug for recreational and medicinal purposes (Verma, 2018).

Synthetic drugs

Over the past decade, synthetic drugs have begun to appear in significant quantities in Afghanistan. The first seizure of methamphetamines on record occurred in Helmand in 2008 (Bjelica, 2015). Since then, the prevalence of methamphetamines has steadily increased, with 17 kilograms of crystal meth (called *shisha*, or *glass*, in Dari) discovered in 14 provinces in 2015 (Bjelica, 2015). Tablet-based synthetics are growing in popularity and mainly originate in central Asia (Bjelica, 2015). Crystal meth use appears to have first originated in western Afghanistan, while MDMA is prevalent in Kabul and Kunduz (UNODC, 2017). However, quantities are low in comparison to opium and cannabis, and thus synthetic drugs barely register in national discussions on illicit drugs (UNODC, 2017).

Initially, synthetic drugs were manufactured in neighbouring countries and imported into Afghanistan. However, there are indications that methamphetamine labs are beginning to appear within Afghanistan's borders (Bjelica, 2015). Additionally, sometime in 2018, reports began to emerge that Afghan drug mafias discovered that a wild bush called Oman, indigenous to Afghanistan and widely available in several mountainous provinces, could be used to produce crystal meth. By eliminating the need to import pseudoprime for meth production, this discovery has brought down the price of meth production significantly, from approximately 100,000-200,000 Afs/kilo to around 40,000 Afs/kilo.[1] Recent reports suggest the domestic methamphetamine industry is expanding rapidly, and that it is likely being produced for both domestic consumption and export (Mansfield and Soderholm, 2019).

Unlike heroin and cannabis, some synthetic drugs are mainly consumed by the young urban middle class and elite. Tablet K, a stimulant similar to MDMA, has appeared over the last few years and is widespread on elite university campuses in Kabul such as the American University of Afghanistan. However, a poorer quality variant of the drug, probably manufactured in Pakistan, has recently been reported on the streets of Nangarhar, seemingly targeted towards mass consumption.[2]

The socio-economic dynamics and health implications of increased synthetic drug consumption have yet to be explored in academic studies. As synthetic drugs differ from

[1] Source: information received by email from key informant, 6 August 2019.

[2] Source: information received by email from key informant, 4 April 2019. Information not yet substantiated.

opium and heroin in having a longstanding history of customary cultivation and use, it remains to be seen whether production and consumption of these drugs will produce more disruptive effects in Afghan society. Will the effects of consumption be notably distinct, both in terms of health effects and social acceptance/norms? How might the spatial dynamics of illicit drug production be affected? These are questions for urgent consideration and should be explored in future studies.

3. Causal factors related to the establishment and expansion of illicit drugs

Origins and pre-Soviet era establishment

There is very little rigorously collected quantitative data on cultivation trends in the years prior to 1979. Most existing data derives from Afghan Government reports on cultivation levels to the international community, which were conducted on an irregular basis and likely highly inaccurate. While there are records of licit opium exports in the years prior to 1945, these figures omit unregulated opium cultivation and significant amounts of trading on the black market (Bradford, 2013). Most major works analysing the pre-1979 era rely on primarily qualitative data, including archival work, interviews and secondary accounts.

Most literature concurs that both cannabis and opium cultivation is a longstanding practice in Afghanistan, stretching back centuries and rooted in broader regional agricultural patterns. While the cannabis plant is native to the region, opium is thought to have been introduced through trading routes along the Silk Road. Much more recently, synthetic drugs have appeared via smuggling networks in neighbouring countries. An explanatory factor for the introduction of non-native illicit drugs is therefore the appearance of requisite levels of technological innovation, the key mechanism of transmission being trade and knowledge/cultural exchange. Technological diffusion also plays a role in introducing more advanced forms of drug processing: the first appearance of heroin labs has been attributed to a handful of foreign chemists who travelled to Afghanistan in the early 1970s (DuPee, 2010).

Historical records emphasise the relationship between drugs and political authority, both formal or informal. Importantly, both cannabis and opium cultivation materialised in Afghanistan and developed as cottage industries before global regimes seeking to regulate or prohibit the practice were established, and therefore political elites had no incentive to enforce prohibition during this period. On the contrary, Afghanistan exported opium lawfully in the early 20th century, allowing for the industry to develop and for farmers to refine their methods without fear of sanction.

The lack of clear Islamic or customary guidance regarding the production or consumption of these substances was undoubtedly a factor in its establishment, as strong local norms against cannabis or opium cultivation did not materialise amongst the predominantly rural population. Customary consumption of these drugs developed organically, as they were useful medicinal and recreational resources for an extremely impoverished population with few economic alternatives. These three factors – knowledge sharing/trade, customary practices, and tacit acceptance, if not encouragement from traditional sources of political and moral authority – are generally cited in the literature to explain the origins of drug cultivation in Afghanistan.

However, more substantive debates explore reasons for regional variation in cannabis and opium cultivation and why levels of cultivation gradually expanded in the pre-Soviet War era.

One unresolved question concerns the relative importance of domestic versus external factors. As noted above, drug cultivation and trade were widespread throughout Asia until the early and mid-20th century, when neighbouring countries began to restrict these substances. As other countries in the region passed successive bans on opium between the 1950s and 1970s including Iran, Pakistan and India, cultivation in Afghanistan ballooned, suggesting that there is at least some displacement effect in regional drug markets (Macdonald, 2007; Haq, 1996). This effect was also described by Bjelica and Foschini (2019) in their description of in the Chinese ban on south Asian hashish in the 1930s, which created a gap in regional markets and led to increased cultivation in Afghanistan. Increased contact with large numbers of western tourists during the height of the hippy trail likely also played some role in raising awareness amongst Afghans of the commercial potential of illicit drugs (Haq, 2000; Allen, 2004). The preponderance of drug-using tourists during the 1960s and 1970s upset more conservative elements of Afghan society, who resented their liberal attitudes towards drugs and saw Western tourists in Kabul primarily as a nuisance - a sentiment that was periodically expressed in publications during the period (Bradford, 2013). By the 1970s, foreigners had also begun to appreciate the commercial potential of the Afghan drug economy, and smugglers seeking to tra c drugs back to the West could readily be found in Kabul (Bradford, 2013). These disruptions in supply, in tandem with rising demand for illicit drugs in the West during the mid-20th century, are often-cited external explanatory variables driving the expansion of cultivation during the pre-Soviet era.

However, other scholars caution against an excessive focus on global and regional factors in explaining the presence and expansion of illicit drugs in Afghanistan during this period. In perhaps the most comprehensive account of the pre-Soviet era illicit drug economy, Bradford (2013) argues that state policies on opium cultivation were primarily influenced by the ambitions and institutional structure of the pre-communist Musahiban state and its often-contentious relationship with tribal authorities scattered across its peripheries. He concludes that the evolution of opium cultivation in Afghanistan is embedded in processes of state formation, which were influenced by but not entirely driven by external factors.

These insights align with Windle (2011), who also emphasises the importance of internal factors in explaining cultivation levels. In a comparative study of Afghanistan and China, he suggests that production in both countries was facilitated by four factors: a lack of central control over the national territory, the existence of local power-holders, internal violent conflict, and the existence of a substantial domestic opium consuming population. He argues that China was eventually more successful at banning cultivation due to the gradual extension of state power, effective initiatives to convince the political elite and farmers to give up opium cultivation for self-interested reasons, and a growing capacity for monitoring and law enforcement. There is certainly more room in the literature, however, for

comparative studies of the relative success of other countries in the region in enforcing bans in comparison to Afghanistan during this period.

The Afghan Government followed many of its neighbours in passing a ban on opium, and later hashish cultivation. However, these initiatives failed to produce any noticeable long-term downward trends in cultivation. From a policy standpoint, it is useful to consider why these bans were ineffective in comparison with Afghanistan's neighbours. Until 1945, the Afghan Government encouraged the cultivation of opium as a licit export, which was small but fairly lucrative. Bradford (2013) argues that Afghanistan passed the 1945 opium ban primarily as a means to attract foreign investment, particularly from the US, as part of a strategy to find alternatives to domestic taxation and hence avoid confrontations with the rural population. While the US was an active purchaser of licit Afghan opium during the Second World War, US officials grew sceptical of the Afghan Government's ability to regulate production and trade of opium as stringently as they claimed and concerned about the expansion of black markets for opium across the country (Bradford, 2013). Participation in the international narcotic regulatory system also helped the Government secure access to badly needed modern medicines (Bradford, 2013).

However, initially the State took few concrete actions to enforce the ban, and generally took an ambivalent stance towards enacting legal measures. Bradford argues that this ambivalence seems driven in part by the Government's awareness of its own limitations in being able to enforce the ban, as well as an unwillingness to antagonise its population. Rather, they saw opium as both a valuable economic industry for its rural population and a lever to secure foreign aid. Afghanistan's relatively low state capacity in comparison to its neighbours and its comparatively large financial dependence on foreign largesse shaped its ambivalent policies towards opium, factors that would continue to be significant in the years to come.

By the late 1950s it was increasingly difficult for the Afghan Government to maintain this stance. Under pressure from the US to act decisively against illicit drugs, the Government enforced an opium cultivation ban in Badakhshan, a remote north eastern province famous for the potency of its crop. By concentrating the ban in this province, the Government could demonstrate decisive action without antagonising powerful Pashtun tribes primarily based in the south (Bradford, 2015). In 1958, opium farmers in Badakhshan were forced to switch to wheat and barley, which pushed tens of thousands of farmers into unemployment and destitution. Though immediate disaster was averted through the provision of emergency food aid by the US, the ban was widely unpopular, and in the years to come, farmers quietly resumed cultivation, to the point where, by 1961, it was once again thought to be the only major cash crop in the province (Bradford, 2013). Further efforts by the Afghan Government in the 1960s and 1970s similarly failed to make a significant and long-term dent in opium cultivation levels in the country.

It is worth examining the choices of individual farmers and communities in deciding whether or not to comply with these bans. Most accounts indicate that the vast majority of farmers were motivated primarily by economic considerations. Opium poppy is more labour intensive than other crops, therefore providing vital income to poor labourers and growers

with few other alternatives (Bradford, 2013; Mansfield, 2016). It is relatively drought-resistant, non-perishable, and has a shorter growth cycle than many food crops (DuPee, 2010). Many Afghans also welcomed the growing number of entrepreneurial foreigners increasingly present during the 1970s, who facilitated links with international trafficking networks and contributed to the growing professionalization (and hence profitability) of the hash and opium trades (Bradford, 2013). Another factor that appears to have led to an expansion of cultivation in this era was the proliferation of new agricultural technologies, ironically often delivered through US-funded agricultural development programmes (Buddenberg, 2016). These economic incentives made opium cultivation attractive enough for farmers and traffickers to accept nominal risk of defying the ban.

However, Bradford also identifies cultural and political factors in accounting for non-compliance with the ban. First, there were significant cultural differences between international and Afghan approaches to opium use. This was particularly the case in peripheral areas like Badakhshan, authorities underestimated the centrality of opium use as a positive good in terms of providing economic security and medicinal relief. Instead, they viewed opium use primarily as a vice to be stamped out, a typical misperception in US anti-drug policies across the region (Bradford, 2013). Because UN and US officials lacked an understanding of the positive role of opium within these communities, they failed to recognise the need to provide the public with reasonable alternatives. The benefits of eradication, manifesting mainly in terms of attracting foreign aid, primarily benefited officials in the central Government. Attempts to convince the public that eradication was in their best interest were nominal at best, and unconvincing for those whose livelihoods depended on opium. Furthermore, non-compliance was, for some, an expression of resentment against a remote political elite that many Afghans saw as corrupt, oppressive, and unhelpful in any practical manner. Bradford concludes that pre-1979 opium bans had the ultimate effect of exacerbating divisions between the Afghan state and its citizens and contributing to the socio-political fragmentation that would eventually culminate in violence at the end of the 1970s.

In sum, studies on the pre-1979 era identify a variety of explanatory variables for the origins and expansion of the illicit drug economy in Afghanistan. One set of factors emphasises external and regional factors, including technological transfer of cultivation methods prior to the 20th century, growing exposure to the commercial and entrepreneurial potential of the drug economy from the mid-20th century onwards, and finally the import of improved agricultural technologies that increased yields from all types of crops, including opium and cannabis. Additionally, displacement effects owing to drug bans in neighbouring countries have been documented multiple times. Finally, investments in transportation networks and the signing of trade agreements, such as the Afghan Transit Trade Agreement (ATTA) with Pakistan in the 1970s, further facilitated the development of smuggling networks (Goodhand, 2005).

Other evidence sees the roots of the drug economy as being explained primarily by the internal dynamics of the Afghan state. These arguments emphasise the desire of successive Afghan governments in the mid-20th century to attract foreign aid in order to pursue a modernisation agenda and avoid domestic taxation, which in turn incentivised

them to ban cultivation. However, poor state capacity and a limited ability to enforce the law in remote areas of the country led to nominal enforcement, with few effects on overall cultivation levels. Where more stringent enforcement did take place, it was selectively targeted towards poorer, peripheral regions inhabited by marginalised ethnicities and tribes. Enforcement was economically disastrous for these regions and was quickly overturned, while deepening distrust between citizens and the central Government. Local elites had few incentives to assist the Government, and therefore encouraged or turned a blind eye to cultivation. These internal dynamics help explain why Afghanistan was less successful than its neighbours in enforcing drug bans.

While the relative weight of internal and external factors in explaining the origins and expansion of the drug economy are still subject to debate, it is likely that both are simultaneously true: the gradual expansion of the illicit drug economy was a consequence of a weak and politically fragmented state increasingly exposed to and shaped by international political and economic forces. Greater dependence on, and integration with, international networks increased the commercial value of drug cultivation, making participation in the illicit economy more attractive for farmers and traffickers relative to other alternatives.

However, these incentives were common to all countries in the region, and do not fully explain the atypical patterns of cultivation observed in Afghanistan. The internal characteristics of the Afghan state, particularly its inability to consistently establish authority throughout its territories, helps explain why Afghanistan lagged behind other regional countries in discouraging cultivation. The fact that opium and hashish consumption had positive medicinal and recreational uses also likely played a role in the steady expansion of cultivation, though claims that consumption is an integral cultural practice are perhaps overstated. The fact that drug users were sometimes referred to pejoratively and negative perceptions of Western drug tourism suggests that Afghan society itself was divided on moral norms related to drug use. However, the key constraint hampering the Afghan State was one of limited willingness and capacity for consistent enforcement, a constraint that became increasingly severe as a succession of political crises wracked Afghanistan throughout the 1970s.

This section has focused mainly on identifying the possible causes of the establishment of the illicit drug economy in pre-Soviet Afghanistan. It is also worth reflecting on the consequences of the illicit drug economy in Afghanistan, as well as the Afghan State's various responses to it. In contrast to documents seeking to understand the origins and causes of the drug economy, there is a comparative dearth of analytical work exploring these consequences. An open question is whether the existence of the illicit drug economy actively contributed to the chronic weakness of the Afghan State, or was merely a reflection of it. It is possible that illicit revenues increased the economic power of local elites outside of formal government and hence gave them greater power to resist the central Government's efforts to project authority and consolidate power. Certainly, the inability of the Afghan Government to control the drug economy was often seen as a signal of state weakness, and similarly the Government's periodic attempts to assert control were intended to demonstrate state authority. These signals were crude, but had real consequences: US

officials pointed to the existence of sizeable black markets in the early 1940s as evidence against supporting Afghanistan as a licit opium producer. Had these illicit markets not existed, opium might have continued to be a profitable licit export for the country beyond 1945.

However, it is also clear that illicit cultivation provided some desperately poor communities with medicinal and recreational benefits, and provided additional incomes for subsistence farmers and unskilled laborers. By increasing the economic stability of these communities, cultivation likely reduced poverty and hardship. The economic catastrophe in Badakhshan after the 1958 ban demonstrated how fundamental the opium industry was for the rural population in certain areas of the country. Furthermore, Bradford (2013) argues that the state's periodic efforts to enforce bans on cultivation were ultimately more damaging to the state than the illicit drug economy itself, fostering an oppositional relationship between the state and its citizens: 'The establishment of an anti-narcotics policy allowed the Musahiban to portray the Afghan traders as smugglers, posing a significant threat to Afghanistan and its neighbours and thus requiring an appropriate response from the state...drug policy, in this vein, is not only about the drugs themselves, but more important, about the regulation of people whose lives transcended the borders and laws imposed upon them.' (Bradford, 2013:23) While drug policy was unlikely the decisive factor in driving political upheaval during the 1970s, it was symptomatic of a deep divide between the state and the vast majority of its citizens, and certain groups most affected by drug prohibition, such as farmers or traders, likely bristled against such heavy-handed interventions.

Finally, there is a notable gap in the literature with regards to the spatial dynamics of how and why the illicit drug industry established itself and flourished in particular parts of the country over others. While unfavourable agricultural conditions in particular areas of the country may play an explanatory role – opium (poppy tends not to grow very well in provinces like Kunduz that have a high water table, for example), work by scholars such as Goodhand, Mansfield and others have argued that the expansion and contraction of the state is the decisive factor in explaining spatial variation in production. During historical periods where the state has been relatively strong, production tends to concentrate in upland areas, valley heads, and other remote areas. Trading and transit of illicit drugs, by contrast, are often concentrated around booming trade hubs, benefiting from the establishment of new trading routes, both formal and informal. In a similar vein, Bradford (2019) observes that large-scale agricultural investments in Helmand, as well as growing disillusionment with the state, were precursors to the establishment of the now-dominant illicit opium economy there. Unfavourable agricultural conditions often have political roots: research conducted by Pain (2008) suggests that inequalities in water distribution explain variations in poppy cultivation in Balkh. There is room to explore the reasons for spatial variation in the illicit drug economy in greater detail, as well as how and why favourable conditions shift over time.

Armed conflict and the illicit drug economy: the post-1979 Soviet era and civil war period

The end of the Musahiban Dynasty and the onset of large-scale violence in the wake of the Soviet invasion had profound consequences for illicit drug economies, which exponentially expanded during the 1980s and 1990s. By the mid-1990s, Afghanistan had become the world's dominant producer of opium, far outpacing its global competitors. Existing literature overwhelmingly concurs that the outbreak of conflict was a major factor in this expansion, as drug economies became closely associated with pro- and anti-government armed factions participating in the Soviet-Afghan War, an association which intensified during the civil war. Accordingly, research concerning this period onwards sheds light on the second of the two research questions of this essay: in what ways do illicit drug economies shape the dynamics of state fragility and armed conflict?

DuPee (2010) identifies a number of specific causal factors during the Afghan-Soviet war that led to the expansion of the illicit drug economy, which rose from an estimated 300 tons in 1982 to 875 tons by 1987, and then ballooned to 1,980 tons by 1991. First, the outbreak of war led farmers to prioritise opium due to its reliability relative to other crops, and its non-perishability meant that farmers could use opium stores as a form of savings and credit during uncertain economic times. This was exacerbated by the targeting and destruction of much of the country's agricultural infrastructure by both Soviet forces and rival Mujahadeen factions, which decimated much of the country's licit agricultural output and forced farmers to increasingly rely on crops that consumed relatively little water, like opium. Between 1978 and 1982, total acreage devoted to rice production in Afghanistan plummeted to 65%, wheat to 37.2%, and cotton to a mere 15.7% (DuPee, 2010).

DuPee (2010) also cites the gradual erosion of state authority as a causal factor, particularly of the country's rural hinterlands. Contemporaneous accounts estimate that Mujahadeen fighters controlled or influenced 80-90% of these areas by day, and exerted near-total control at night (Arnold, 1985). Meanwhile, the Afghan Government's reach, already limited, shrunk drastically, and by 1985 was concentrated in major cities and road networks (Goodhand, 2005; DuPee, 2010). Afghanistan's borderlands – particularly the eastern frontier with Pakistan and the north-eastern border between Badakhshan and Tajikistan – became predominant arteries of support for Mujahadeen fighters, and the trafficking of arms, men and narcotics became commonplace. In these border areas, illicit drug cultivation flourished.

Finally, DuPee (2010) attributes the expansion of Afghanistan's narcotics industry to political economic factors that emerged during the war. Chief among these is was the militarisation of Afghan society, which fundamentally transformed social structures in Afghanistan and led to the proliferation of local military commanders, while traditional sources of authority, such as tribal elders and landowners, were marginalised. Anti-communist factions quickly asserted control over existing illicit trafficking networks, appropriating proceeds to fund anti-government violence. Militia leaders and their followers formed mini-statelets across the country, consolidating power over resources, manpower, and transportation routes. DuPee argues that local military leaders saw profit from illicit

activities as a means to enhance their status and expand their fighting capabilities. These activities attracted more-opportunistically minded individuals to get involved in black market activities, blurring the lines between insurgent and criminal activities.

DuPee's observations largely dovetail with other studies on Afghanistan's illicit economy during the Soviet and post-Soviet era. One early account from MacDonald (1992) cautioned that the protracted Soviet War, the weakness of state authority, and the proliferation of cross-border smuggling networks were to blame for the country's rapidly expanding opium trade. Further supporting the important role of war-related displacement, Haq (1996) and Girardet (2012) describe how the Mujahadeen used middlemen, often embedded in the large Afghan refugee population in Pakistan, to secure a steady flow of arms and goods necessary to fight the war. Similarly, work by Goodhand (2000) outlining provincial-level dynamics in Badakhshan attributed the emergence of the opium economy to a combination of international factors (the decline of Cold War patronage and the erosion of strong central authority in neighbouring countries), national factors (state collapse and the proliferation of local commanders with de-facto authority), and village-level factors (economic/environmental pressures and increased contact with the outside world).

While the notion that the outbreak of violence had an exacerbating effect on the opium economy is more or less a consensus view, there is a notable distinction in terms of framing that began to emerge in the literature during this period and would grow more important as successive conflicts in Afghanistan raged on. The linking of illicit drug economies with violent armed groups led many scholars and policymakers to view drug economies as a major source of instability. This point of view was informed by the proliferation of studies during the 1980s and 1990s, linking illicit drug economies and terrorism around the world. The term 'narco-terrorism' became popularised during this period (Krasna, 1996; Lupsha, 1989; Steinitz, 1985; Wardlaw, 1988; Steinberg, 2000). Work by scholars like MacDonald (1992) framed the illicit drug economy in Afghanistan as problematic primarily due to its dominant role in supplying consumption markets in Europe and America. These works framed illicit economies as inherently destabilising and hence, an obstacle to lasting peace and stability.

An alternative paradigm, derived mainly from anthropological and in-depth case studies, took a more nuanced view. These studies recognised the potentially stabilising function illicit activities played in supporting the livelihoods and resilience of communities savaged by war. Goodhand (2004) distinguishes between coping economies, referring to vulnerable individuals and communities who engage in illicit economies out of necessity, and shadow and combat economies, which describe more traditionally understood informal economic activities and/or those related directly to conflict. Rubin (2000) similarly notes that the civil war and its aftermath took a devastating toll on the population: during the 1990s, the vast majority of Afghans lived in destitution, ranking lowest in the world on almost all human development indicators. A sharp decline in the value of the afghani currency after the Soviet withdrawal created additional incentives for smuggling and opium production (Rubin, 2000). Thus, for the vast majority of participants, illicit activities were part of an invaluable and desperately needed survival strategy. Although these competing paradigms emerged

during this period, they continue to be debated in contemporary academic and policy discussions.

Illicit drug economies under Taliban rule: 1994-2001

The Taliban was birthed in the early 1990s as a grassroots religious and political movement, positioning itself as an antidote to the chaos and lawlessness during the civil war. From its base in southern Afghanistan, the Taliban swiftly conquered most of Afghanistan in the space of a few years. With regards to the illicit economy, Taliban leaders made two pledges upon coming to power: ending widespread corruption and extortion by local commanders against the population, and fighting cultivation of opium poppies (Labrousse, 2005).

True to their word, the Taliban were largely successful at mobilising social and religious capital to eliminate all but its strongest competitors, thus establishing a more stable and consolidated political settlement (Rubin, 2000; Dorronsoro, 2005). This bought the movement a significant amount of goodwill amongst the trading and transport classes, who for the first time in years could move goods across the country without fear of arbitrary extortion or abuse from local militia groups. Accordingly, cross-border trade once again began to flourish (Rubin, 2000; Goodhand, 2005).

The initial period of Taliban rule introduced a crackdown on drug use in the areas they conquered. In Kandahar, the Taliban suppressed both hashish and opium cultivation and trade during the 1994-1995 growing season, but quickly realiaed this stance was financially and politically untenable (Felbab-Brown, 2005; Labrousse, 2005). They relaxed their policies and adopted a more benign attitude towards cultivation, allowing local elites to maintain a share of opium profits (Byrd and Ward, 2004). The Taliban also benefited from a share of the profits, imposing taxes on opium cultivation and trade (Rubin, 2000). However, Rubin adds that revenues derived from the opium economy were relatively meagre compared to other sources of revenue such as the transit trade. The main opposition to the Taliban was the Northern Alliance, which retained control of a small area of the country for the duration of Taliban rule. They also engaged in illegal drug cultivation and smuggling to enhance war eff orts, though they made far more from smuggling other commodities, particularly gems (Rubin, 2000). Felbab-Brown (2006) notes that these more relaxed policies helped the Taliban shore up popular legitimacy, particularly amongst traffickers, and the Government went so far as to provide official licenses for cultivation and to provide training and fertiliser to opium farmers. Cultivation during this period also expanded to prime agricultural land in lowland areas.

Ideologically, they expressed a more pragmatic view on the export of opium while discouraging domestic use. In a 1997 interview, Taliban leader Mullah Omar outlined the regime's ambiguous moral view on opium cultivation: 'One thing, at least, is clear: we will not permit neither opium nor heroin to be sold in Afghanistan itself. It is not up to us to protect non-Muslims who wish to buy drugs and get intoxicated...Our goal for ourselves is to gradually eliminate all drug production in the country so as to safeguard our youth.' (Labrousse, 2005). In the same year and at the urging of the UN International Drug Control

Program (UNDCP), the Taliban publicly announced a ban on the production of heroin, though not explicitly on opium cultivation (Economist, 1997).

Under these conditions, cultivation continued to rise and Afghanistan's global share of opium production increased to an estimated 70-75% of the world's supply by 1999 (Farrell and Thorne, 2005; Goodhand, 2005). However, the Taliban regime once again began to take an increasingly harder line against the drug economy towards the end of the decade. This appears to have occurred mainly as a means to offset growing international opprobrium towards the regime, including a highly publicised global outcry against its treatment of Afghan women, as well as its harbouring of Usama bin Laden (Rubin, 2000; Farrell and Thorne, 2005). By 1998, UNODC was the only major UN organisation with a presence in Afghanistan and regular contact with the Taliban Regime. Farrell and Thorne (2005) outline how the Regime was gradually convinced to implement a cultivation ban over the next two years, beginning with a March 1999 meeting between UNODC, Taliban leaders, and Pakistani law enforcement and culminating shortly after in a July 2000 *fatwa* against poppy cultivation and opium production. The Taliban may also have calculated that its territorial control was consolidated enough by the end of the decade to weather popular resistance to such a move (Felbab-Brown, 2006).

This ban was remarkably successful, producing an estimated 99% reduction in opium cultivation in Taliban-controlled areas, including, Nangarhar and Helmand, two of the historically largest cultivators.[3] Although the ban was short-lived due to the regime's overthrow by international forces in the wake of the attacks on 11 September 2001, it was unprecedented in scale, having 'the most profound impact on opium/heroin supply in modern history'(Jelsma, 2005).

One dominant explanation for the successful ban attributes sharp reductions in cultivation to the determined and well-coordinated enforcement efforts of the Taliban Government. Farrell and Thorne (2005) compared the ban against four contemporaneous case comparisons: non-Taliban areas within Afghanistan, countries adjacent to Afghanistan, Myanmar (Afghanistan's main competitor in opium cultivation), and the rest of the world, and found that there were no plausible exogenous explanations for the reduction in cultivation, such as changes in global opium or heroin markets. They further described how enforcement mechanisms included a variety of trusted authority figures, using specially-created local *shuras* (councils) comprised of police, spiritual leaders, tribal elders, and government officials. Finally, the Taliban issued swift and often brutal punishments to violators, including imprisonment and public shaming, sometimes delivered to local authorities as well (Farrell and Thorne, 2005). Contemporary US observers cited the Taliban's framing of the ban as a religious duty as a major factor in its success (Crossette, 2001).

Others perceived more cynical motives in the Taliban's decision to enforce the ban. According to Kreutzmann (2007), accumulated stockpiles of opium caused the market price of opium to decline in the years immediately preceding the ban. Therefore, implementing

[3] These reductions are based on UNODC estimates, based on field surveys carried out in the country during and immediately after the 2000/2001 growing season (UNODC, 2001).

the ban was a way for the Taliban to drive the value of their stockpiles up, while also securing promises of aid from the international community. Indeed, the price of opium increased ten-fold in the following year (Kreutzmann, 2007). Irrespective of intent, it is also unclear whether the ban would have been sustainable, as it had devastating effects on rural livelihoods, both for farmers involved in opium cultivation but also labourers participating in the harvest, effects that were further exacerbated by a severe drought (Mansfield, 2006; Jelsma, 2005; Crossette, 2001). In a rebuttal to Farrell and Thorne, Jelsma (2005) notes that the ban resulted in a breakdown of informal systems of credit specifically related to opium and precipitated a refugee crisis as thousands of Afghans fled to neighbouring countries in search of work. Public finances also suffered from the loss of tax revenue from the opium sector, and some of the international aid pledged to the regime never materialised, resulting in bitter disillusionment within the Government as international sanctions remained in place (Jelsma, 2005).

Given the Taliban's abrupt fall from power in late 2001, it remains an open question whether the ban would have resulted in long-term reductions in opium cultivation, or whether it was simply an act of desperation by a cash-strapped and isolated regime that would have collapsed in the face of an economic backlash. In the final months of the regime, the Taliban lifted the ban in anticipation of an imminent confrontation with the U. and fears that the Northern Alliance, who had never stopped cultivation, would be at an advantage financially and politically (Felbab-Brown, 2006). Ending the unpopular ban was a means to shore up political capital amongst the population before the invasion. However, the short-lived ban carries useful analytical and policy implications. It demonstrates that drastic supply side reductions are possible in a short space of time if implemented by a determined and relatively consolidated government prepared to endure high political and economic costs, and suggests lessons for how governments presiding over loosely governed areas might mobilise local authorities to promote and enforce bans effectively. However, the policy produced swift and severe economic and political crises that indicated the centrality of the opium economy for rural livelihoods in certain areas. These crises might have proven too difficult for the Taliban to continue supporting the ban had the regime survived beyond 2001.

Post-2001: illicit drug economies rebounds

Following the US-led invasion of 2001 and the establishment of an interim government to replace the Taliban, opium cultivation quickly rebounded, reaching near-record levels by 2004 (Gall, 2004). While at first the international community took little notice, preoccupied with the establishment of nascent political institutions, by the mid-2000s the problem of narcotics received a significant amount of attention, particularly as the Taliban insurgency began to stir around the same time. In the years since, a tremendous volume of academic and grey literature has been produced on the topic. While it is not possible to review this literature exhaustively in this paper, I will assess relevant debates and advances in the literature in the following section.

4. Contemporary debates on illicit drug economy and violence

Perhaps the most important and predominant popular narrative in recent years blames the drug economy for the success and expansion of anti-government insurgent violence. Current President Ashraf Ghani recently claimed that 'without drugs, the war would have been long over' (Mushal, 2017). Others have described the drug economy as a 'Marshall Plan' for insurgent groups and argued that defeating the Taliban is impossible without eradicating opium production (Walters and Murray, 2017). And yet, opium cultivation and trafficking has risen steadily in Afghanistan and a variety of counter-narcotics approaches, including eradication, crop substitution, and various combinations of the two have failed to arrest this trajectory. Indeed, both violence and the drug economy have flourished in tandem over the past 18 years. This has given rise to a significant amount of literature investigating the causal relationship between political disorder and illicit drugs.

Another major source of contention concerns which policy responses are the most appropriate and effective in curtailing illicit drug economies. In the early and mid-2000s, counter-narcotics strategies were designed with a law and order approach in mind, seeking to constrain supplies of illicit drugs. Policymakers predominantly emphasised interdiction and poppy eradication, including manual eradication by armed military units (aerial eradication was advocated by some US officials but repeatedly rejected by the Afghan Government), over alternative livelihoods programmes (SIGAR, 2016). Bewley-Taylor (2014) provides some useful historical context on some of the major domestic and international actors involved in shaping Afghanistan's 2003 National Drug Control Strategy. While some studies found these measures effective, others claim that both of these policies had unintended negative effects. Interdiction efforts ended up mainly targeting low-level traders, allowing the drug trade to be concentrated in the hands of power-brokers with enough resources and connections to bribe or intimidate law enforcement officials (Felbab-Brown, 2013). Forced eradication programmes were often deeply unpopular, prompting unrest and costing the Government a great deal of legitimacy. For example, while former Nangarhar Governor Gul Agha Sherzai was reasonably successful in the short term in reducing opium cultivation in his province during his tenure, he grew increasingly unpopular amongst the rural population, as many felt that he neglected the well-being of his constituents in order to further his political ambitions (Goodhand and Mansfield, 2010). These grievances created favourable opportunities for the Taliban, who could offer protection to traffickers and opium producers.

These two debates: the relationship between violence and the illicit drug economy, and the effectiveness of potential intervention to curb the drug economy, such as eradication and alternative livelihoods, have been addressed by a large number of studies. Below, I summarise major findings in quantitative and qualitative approaches since 2001.

Quantitative and mixed-methods approaches

While the vast majority of literature before 2001 relied mainly on qualitative methods, the post-2001 literature is notable for a growing range of methodologies. In large part this is due to the increased availability of regularly-collected quantitative data on illicit drug economies The UN began collecting data from ground surveys of opium poppy cultivation area and in Afghanistan during the 1993-1994 growing season and has continued collecting annual data ever since. Although there are questions over the precision of this data, the availability of regular quantitative data over time has led to the emergence of some longitudinal studies related to illicit drug economies. UNODC releases an annual opium survey that analyses overall trends, disaggregated by province and district, and that outlines key contextual challenges frequently cited by analysts and policymakers. However, it is worth noting that this data often clashes with US military data on poppy cultivation accumulated since the early 2000s. These inconsistencies underline the difficulty in collecting reliable and accurate data on cultivation levels, in spite of considerable investments on improving survey methodologies.

Despite these limitations, a few economists have used this data to develop more complex empirical models to estimate factors affecting cultivation trends, including modelling rural household decision making with regards to choosing between licit and illicit crops. This work is linked to a broader literature on the economic dimensions of criminal behaviour, drawing from foundational theories first outlined by Becker (1968).Combining UNODC data with year-over-year market values of opium and wheat, Clemens (2008) estimated that alternative livelihoods programmes result in just a 6.5% drop in cultivation, while substantial crop eradication efforts would be needed to achieve moderate reductions in production. While he acknowledged limitations to data quality and comprehensiveness, he concluded that the narcotics industry in Afghanistan was relatively inelastic to drug control policies, and expressed scepticism about the prospect of alternative livelihoods to lead to significant changes in behaviour in the short term. In a follow-up study, Clemens (2013) found that counter-narcotics initiatives designed to reduce illicit drug funding to the Taliban had the opposite effect: anti-narcotics enforcement had significant effects in government-controlled strongholds, which in turn increased the flow of drug-trade resources to the Taliban. These findings are broadly consistent with studies by Latek et al. (2010) and Andersson (2013), suggesting that the illicit drug trade acts as a source of economic stability for Afghan farmers. More recently, Greenfield et al. (2017) has produced similar findings with a slightly modified household production model of how Afghan farmers maximise utility by choosing between opium-poppy and licit crop cultivation, taking into account different types of land-ownership.

As the Taliban insurgency began to re-intensify, other quantitative and mixed methods studies have attempted to illuminate presumed links between illegal drug cultivation and insurgent violence. An early attempt by Koehler and Zurcher (2007) combined interview and survey data in Laghman and Nangarhar provinces to explore relationships between state building, conflict, and narcotics. Analysing sharp drops in cultivation due to provincial opium bans, the study found that eradication efforts had a negative effect on rural livelihoods and increased the likelihood of conflict. An econometrics paper by Lind et al. (2014) showed that

rising conflict (proxied by Western casualties) was associated with a subsequent rise in opium cultivation, but that cultivation was not a significant contributor to violence. Similarly, combining UNODC opium price data with a US military dataset on violent incidents in 15 provinces, Bove and Elia (2013) found that rises in opium prices – and therefore potential revenue from illegal activities – had no considerable impact on the intensification of insurgent activities. A dissenting study is Piazza (2012), which finds that between 1994 and 2008, provinces that produce opium feature higher levels of terrorist attacks and casualties, and that rising opium predicts a subsequent rise in casualties. Piazza also draws on the same UNODC dataset to estimate opium levels, suggesting that the discrepancy in findings is likely due to differences in how violence is classified. Piazza uses the Global Terrorism Database to account for violent incidents, but only includes terrorist attacks targeting civilians, excluding attacks against coalition forces as well as all incidents where motives are ambiguous or non-political. This is in contrast to Lind et al. (2014), who track violence against Western forces.

The authors acknowledge similar challenges and limitations to their findings. Most quantitative work draws from the same or similar datasets, and therefore the quality of the findings ultimately rest on the quality of the underlying data. Whilst methodologies for estimating cultivation have become more comprehensive over time, there are still deficiencies and omissions with these datasets, as UNODC acknowledges in its annual reports. Similarly, conflict databases are often based on social and/or media accounts, and may therefore omit certain types of violent incidents. In particular, Lind et al. (2014) use of Western casualties as a proxy for violence fails to capture other types of local-level violence that may perhaps be more pertinent (though excluding these incidents, as Piazza (2012) does, is also problematic). Spatial dynamics are often over-conflated: for example, positive correlations in violence and cultivation in particular districts may obscure the fact that these phenomena occur in separate sub-district areas. Additionally, scholars using opium prices as an independent variable increasingly must confront the fact that Afghanistan's share of global opium production is so dominant it is questionable whether shifts in prices can be considered exogenous to the country's internal dynamics.

In spite of these challenges, these studies have produced broadly consistent findings. Despite slight differences in methodologies and datasets, this body of work provides more evidence that farmers engage in poppy cultivation in order to improve their economic well-being, and that alternative livelihood programmes are unlikely to make a significant dent in cultivation, particularly in the short-term. The authors are sceptical about the effectiveness of eradication programmes, often identifying unintended and counter-productive effects.

Finally, these studies found weak or non-existent evidence for the claim that the opium economy is a driver of conflict. It is notable that these findings correspond with a significant amount of qualitative work produced over the past two decades, despite having been produced in largely distinct silos. In fairness, the quantitative studies listed above do acknowledge and cite some authoritative qualitative studies; however, in general there appears to be little cross-disciplinary awareness, nor do economics papers seem to have considerably influenced major policy discussions. More cross-disciplinary integration would

help inform mainstream academic and policy debates on illicit drug cultivation and would benefit the discussion as a whole.

Qualitative approaches

The majority of work on illicit drug economies continues to draw from qualitative methodologies. Given the large amount of interest on counter-narcotics programming over the past two decades, a significant amount of evidence can be found in the grey literature, particularly case studies or evaluations of specific interventions. These have been accompanied by a large number of comprehensive academic studies of the illicit drug economy, as well a number of illuminating anecdotal and/or journalistic accounts.

Perhaps the most prolific body of work in this area is by David Mansfield, who has produced a steady stream of academic and policy assessments of the illicit drug economy in Afghanistan over the past two decades, often in partnership with various co-authors (Mansfield, 2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2006, 2011, 2016; Goodhand and Mansfield, 2010; Mansfield and Pain, 2005, 2006, 2008; Ward et al., 2008; Ingalls and Mansfield, 2017). Other scholars who have made notable and ongoing contributions to the literature include Jonathan Goodhand, Vanda Felbab-Brown, and Adam Pain (Goodhand, 2000, 2004, 2005, 2008, 2012; Felbab-Brown, 2005, 2006, 2013; Pain, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2012). This is not an exhaustive list of citations, rather a selection of more widely cited works.

A number of consistent insights have emerged from this voluminous output. Many scholars explore the role of opium in rural development, often through in-depth case studies of specific subnational regions or villages. They found strong evidence that the predominant motivation for the vast majority of farmers in cultivating poppy is to increase their incomes. Parenti (2015) argues that cultivation therefore becomes more prevalent during periods of economic vulnerability, such as drought. As opium cultivation is far more labour-intensive than other licit alternatives, it also provides economic benefits for a large number of small farmers, sharecroppers and seasonal laborers. At the village level, opium cultivation provides many benefits: it functions as a form of social protection, a source of economic growth, and a contributor to local conflict resolution (Pain, 2012). Most studies also found that there is very little evidence that farmers are coerced into cultivation by armed actors, as is sometimes claimed, though there are some indications that they are actively encouraged to do so. Instead, individuals and communities participate in the illicit drug economy out of economic self-interest. Aggressive counter-narcotics policies might therefore expose vulnerable communities to economic risks, particularly in the absence of viable licit alternatives.

Most of these studies were conducted at a time when international military engagement in Afghanistan was at its height, and donors were placing significant pressure on national and subnational governments to show swift progress in reducing cultivation levels using measures such as forced eradication. They offered an alternative narrative to prevailing beliefs about the benefits of this strategy, revealing a more complicated picture of the relationship between drugs and economic development. They expressed scepticism about the effectiveness of eradication policies, arguing that drug bans were deeply unpopular in

many areas and that implementing them could potentially weaken fragile political settlements. Notably, these insights are consistent with the vast majority of studies on the pre-2001 period. It is fair to say there is a near-consensus in the literature about the ineffectiveness of Afghanistan's counter-narcotics policies undertaken in the 2000s, though a considerable number of scholars are ambivalent about the narcotics industry, not least the appropriation of illicit funds by violent actors and negative health effects of widespread drug use within some communities.

Mounting evidence about the weaknesses of these counter-narcotics policies likely had moderating effects on policymakers. An article penned in 2006 by former agricultural minister Ali Jalali acknowledged that forced eradication was counterproductive and unsustainable (Jalali, 2006), and by 2007 voices within the US military were beginning to reassess its counter-narcotics strategy in Afghanistan (Glaze, 2007). In recent years the Afghan Government has taken a softer line on aggressive opium crop eradication, preferring to focus on interventions targeting individuals further up the supply chain, such as traffickers and those operating drug processing labs, while shifting to an alternative livelihoods approach in rural communities. A significant volume of studies has also explored the viability of these livelihoods programmes. Similar to the findings from quantitative studies, most qualitative findings are sceptical about the effectiveness of government and donor community initiatives at reducing cultivation through alternative livelihoods.

An illustrative example is the Helmand Food Zone (HFZ), which Mansfield profiled in a recent study (Mansfield, 2018a). This counter-narcotics effort included a combination of eradication, advocacy, and agricultural development programmes (mainly focused on wheat as a replacement), as well as secondary investments in health, education, and general infrastructure. The programme was accompanied by a major security presence in rural areas previously known for poppy cultivation. Initially, the programme succeeded in significantly reducing poppy cultivation within the HFZ, falling from 103,590 ha to 63,307 ha between 2008 and 2011.

However, HFZ eradication efforts alienated many poorer residents. As harvesting wheat is not as labour-intensive as opium, and many landless poor found themselves with fewer opportunities to earn income. As a result, many moved out of the HFZ to former desert areas north of the Borgha canal where they resumed opium cultivation. By 2012, the increase in cultivation in this area outweighed decreases within the HFZ. The gains within the HFZ may not have been sustainable in any case, as there are indications that the dramatic drop in opium cultivation observed in the early years of the HFZ was attributable in part to favourable wheat prices in comparison to opium, which has since reversed.

This case suggests a number of lessons about alternative livelihoods programmes, which are echoed elsewhere in the literature. While significant reductions in cultivation are possible to achieve within a short period of time, the sustainability of such gains is extremely difficult to maintain without long-term and consistently applied investment and enforcement. Even so, gains are often fleeting, and farmer behaviour highly sensitive to fluctuations in price. Ultimately, these factors are highly localised and subject to constantly shifting conditions, including migration flows and the spread of knowledge and technology.

Other studies, such as an investigation into the spread of opium cultivation in the central province of Ghor, offered additional support for these findings (Ali, 2013). The main lesson evident from the literature is that the success or failure of alternative livelihood programmes is contingent on a vast array of local contingencies, and the tremendous amount of variation from province to province and village to village makes it exceedingly difficult to design alternative livelihoods programmes that can be quickly and widely implemented.

The illicit drug economy and violence

On the relationship between violence and the illicit drug economy, scholars are more divided, particularly on the fundamental question of causality. Does the drug economy cause violence, or is the reverse true: does violence create greater opportunities for drug cultivation and trafficking?

On the one hand, scholars have pointed to a substantive amount of evidence that armed groups draw large sums of financing from the illicit drug economy. Precise estimates are elusive, but the drug trade is considered to be the largest source of income for the Taliban, estimated at roughly US $250 million-$400 million between 2016-2017 (UNODC, 2017). In recent years, the Taliban has expanded control over all stages of the process, directly taking part in production, processing and trafficking of heroin produced in Afghanistan instead of simply collecting rents on the activities (UNODC, 2017). Perhaps the most widely cited academic in this vein is Gretchen Peters, who has published multiple texts arguing in favour of the central role played by the illicit drug economy in funding anti-government insurgents (Peters, 2009a, 2009b; Peters and Rassler, 2010; Peters, 2012). The ‘drugs-terrorism nexus’ in Afghanistan has been further explored by other academic researchers (Shanty, 2011), and is frequently discussed in the popular media (Penketh, 2007; Clark, 2011; McCoy, 2016; Mushal, 2017; McCoy, 2018).

While there is incontrovertible evidence that insurgent groups finance their activities in part through illicit economies, including drugs, the association between armed groups and illicit economies has led to a widely-held belief that the illicit drug economy is a principal cause of violence in Afghanistan. The policy lesson to be drawn, according to this view, is that the best way to defeat insurgent groups is to deprive them of these illicit funds, a justification for integrating counter-narcotics policies into broader counterterrorism strategies.

However, other evidence suggests that the relationship between the illicit drug economy and violent insurgent groups is more complex. First, while many insurgent groups are implicated in the drug economy, it may not be as vital to sustaining insurgent movements as is often presumed. For example, in the eastern province of Nangarhar, some Islamic State affiliates appear to be opposed to poppy cultivation for ideological reasons and have engaged in poppy eradication activities in territories under their control (Zahid and Hasrat, 2016). Generally, Islamic State operatives in Afghanistan are believed to be more reliant on a diverse range of other sources of income, particularly timber and mineral smuggling, kidnapping, extortion, and external donations, primarily from Middle Eastern countries (UNSC, 2016). The Haqqani network, a terrorist group closely affiliated with the Taliban, is also far more reliant on extortion, kidnapping, robbery, and ties to the legal economy in

Pakistan to generate income, though they do extract some rents from drug smuggling (Peters, 2012). Although precise data on the degree to which insurgent groups are dependent on the illicit drug economy for financing is understandably thin, this evidence suggests that singling out the illicit drug economy as a counter-terrorism target may not be a panacea in cutting off armed group funding, and may even incentivise insurgent groups to rely more heavily on predatory behaviours against civilians for funding, such as extortion or kidnapping.

More fundamentally, the alternative causal story initially articulated in works on the Soviet and civil war eras – that breakdowns in political order and widespread violence generates conditions that are conducive for the illicit drug economy to thrive, not the other way around – continues to be relevant in the literature today. Building on work by Suhrke (2006) and Goodhand and Sedra (2007), Pain insists that the rise of opium cultivation can be attributed to four fatal flaws in the post-2001 political settlement: limitations of the Bonn Agreement of 2001; the conflation of the war on terror with a counter-narcotics agenda; rentier dynamics generated by large injections of external aid; and inappropriate state-building models that failed to build on the only durable institutions in rural communities: the family and the village (Pain, 2012). According to this view, opium cultivation is ultimately attributable to chronic failures in governance and development that emerged from this settlement, the effects of which still linger today. The policy implication of this view is that the illicit drug economy cannot be brought under control without first addressing the underlying causes, and aggressive counter-narcotics policies are likely to be worsen the situation.

This debate is yet to be resolved. A major analytical challenge is that both opium and political disorder often appear endogenously related, making it difficult to untangle the precise causal relationship. Nonetheless, advocates of the view that opium cultivation causes violence have yet to explain persuasively why Afghanistan cultivated opium widely before the Soviet invasion, and yet did not experience widespread violence during this period. If anything, a large number of studies have found that periodic attempts to ban opium have been destabilising, precipitating economic crises and prompting grievances against the government. Furthermore, we lack clear explanations for why some opium-producing provinces appear stable, while some provinces that have never cultivated opium widely, such as Kunduz, are rife with insurgent violence (UNODC, 2017). Given the evidence base accumulated to date, it is perhaps fair to say that attributing violent insurgency to opium cultivation is too simplistic, and that there is room for more nuanced research to better explain the relationship between these two variables.

5. Conclusion: a future research agenda

Despite the voluminous amount of research carried out on the illicit drug economy in Afghanistan over the past half century, there are still important academic and policy questions that remain unresolved. This review has identified many of the key texts and debates in the literature on the illicit drug economy in Afghanistan. To conclude, I reflect on some untapped areas of research and potential research questions which would merit further exploration.

Illicit Economies and Violence

First, research on illicit drug economies in Afghanistan could engage more with current debates in the civil war and political violence literature, particularly those related to rebel governance and the internal dynamics of insurgent groups (Thies, 2010; Mampilly, 2012; Jentzsch et al., 2015; Arjona et al., 2015; Huang, 2016; Kubota, 2019). Recent advances in the literature, including variation in organisational structures and political economy, rebel recruitment, intra- and inter-insurgent group conflicts, and the longevity of armed groups raise interesting research questions that are relevant to the debates outlined above. For example, do insurgent groups reliant on illicit drug financing attract different types of recruits than ones more reliant on external donations? Do fluctuations in illicit revenues affect rebel battlefield strategies and organisational structures, and if so, how and why? What explains why armed groups choose to cooperate with each other in conducting illicit activities under some circumstances, and compete violently for control of illicit networks in others? How do the demands of the drug economy influence behaviour of insurgent groups towards civilians in their zones of control? One glaring gap in the literature in this regard is first-hand accounts from current or former insurgents, which are understandably difficult to access in some cases but would constitute an invaluable source of information about decision-making processes with respect to illicit economies.

Another related area of inquiry concerns the nature of the state and its governing arrangements with its peripheries. While this has been highlighted as a major factor in the work of many scholars working on illicit drugs in Afghanistan (e.g. Bradford), there is room for more systematic analysis, both at the macro-level (i.e. measuring state expansion and contraction and the relationship between illicit drug production over time) and micro-level case studies exploring the dynamics of elite bargains and rent seeking over both licit and illicit resources. Literatures on political settlements and brokerage can provide useful analytical frameworks that can be brought to future studies on this subject.

Furthermore, it would be worth considering how illicit drug economies impact different types or categories of violence. For example, to what extent are civilians engaged in illicit trades vulnerable to criminal or state violence, and how do they adapt to those threats? Is there a correlation between personal or domestic violence and illicit drugs? Are women more economically empowered in the household as a result of participation in the illicit economy, and therefore less likely to suffer domestic abuse? Does increased household consumption of certain illicit drugs increase the risk of domestic violence? Indeed, the lack of research

exploring the gendered dimension of the illicit economy is notable; the few extant studies mostly investigate the treatment of women in drug-rehabilitation centres (Abadi et al., 2015; Todd et al., 2008), while broader socio-economic implications are largely ignored. A recent UNODC global report on women and drugs is a step in the right direction (UNODC, 2018a), but more targeted studies exploring gender and drugs issues within the Afghan context would be welcomed. Adopting a more expansive definition of conflict that goes beyond government-insurgent violence can help address some of these gaps.

Finally, future studies on illicit economies and violence could also focus on transitions from war to peace economies, and how various policymakers have dealt with the problem of widespread illicit economies in peace processes. While a sizeable literature on war economies emerged in the mid-2000s, case study data from the ongoing peace process in Afghanistan could contribute additional insights and identify lessons for policymakers from other contexts.

Spatial dynamics of the illicit drug economy

The spatial dynamics of the illicit drug economy could also be explored more comprehensively in future studies. One of the key barriers to this has been a lack of available data on cultivation and trafficking that can be systematically mapped over time. While historical patterns can be broadly reconstructed to some extent, there are risks of recall bias and unreliability, though interdisciplinary historical studies outlining the expansion of markets and processes of accumulation can help illuminate some of these gaps. The works of Hani (2011) is particularly useful in this regard. Medium- to long-term investments in systematic data collection may be costly, but have the potential to yield important insights in changing patterns of production, consumption and trade, particularly with regards to the diffusion into new areas, differences between local markets, and shifts in smuggling routes. Additionally, relationships between licit and illicit industries (whether involvement in one predicts involvement in another, for example) could be further explored. Do certain types of industries yield more cooperative behaviour between different networks, and are others more prone to violence? In Nimroz, for example, there are some indications that people smuggling networks are more likely to collaborate with each other than drug traders and transporters.[4] Mapping out spatial variation in these industries and understanding similarities and differences between them would constitute a significant analytical step forward.

Lastly, the literature reviewed above has largely focused on border areas, where illicit drug cultivation has historically been concentrated. While this is still largely the case, the expansion of opium cultivation into new areas of the country, as well as the nascent appearance of synthetic drugs and mobile labs, raise questions about whether historical spatial patterns of illicit drug cultivation will be altered by the spread of new technologies and knowledge. Future studies could explore the empirical and analytical similarities and differences between drug producing border regions (e.g. Nangarhar) and non-borderland areas (e.g. Ghor). Old dichotomies of ‘producer’ and ‘consumer’ countries also require

[4] Source: information received from key informant, 6 November 2019.

updating, as Afghanistan contains large numbers of illicit drug producers and consumers. This review has not delved significantly into the public health literature, but only a few studies of note have investigated changing patterns of illicit drug consumption in Afghanistan, mostly concentrated in Kabul (Maguet and Majeed, 2010; Todd et al., 2005, 2012). The public health implications of the country's evolving illicit drug economy – and the economic implications for individuals, families and local communities – are areas that would benefit from more research.

6. References

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